The Czech School Culture and Strategies for its Development
The Pre-research

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The School Culture

The concept of school culture has come to education from the field of the business management. It is a factor difficult to define but omnipresent and relatively stable. It contains the convictions and values, understanding, attitudes, meanings, norms, symbols, rituals, ceremonies and preferred patterns of behaviour. This factor is expressed in the behaviour of people at school. The school culture is usually defined at the transrational level (values are regarded as metaphysical, based on convictions, codex of ethics and moral insight), at the rational level (values coming out of social context, norms, customs and expectations are dependent on collective decision-making) and at the subrational level (values are regarded as personal preferences and feelings, they stem from emotions and behavioral characteristics). The school culture is related both to the internal and external school environment. It is linked with work and educational processes at school and it is significant for the school development. Its essence and manifestation is formed in the process of history of a particular school as an institution and include both formal and informal aspects. At school there is usually one dominative culture and its subcultures (the subcultures of pupils, of specific groups of employees etc.).

Pre-research aims

The main aim of the pre-research was to complete our knowledge about the topic concerned so that we could more eruditely commence a large and entire examination of the school culture and strategies for its development. We were particularly concerned with:

- comparing our starting idea about the problem of the school culture and possibilities for its development with ideas of the basic[1] schools' heads (the heads have been chosen as expert population because they are the ones who are directly responsible of the school development - thus their perspective is probably the most fundamental);

- getting feedback about the logic of our reasoning and about the language we use for the description of the problem;

- obtaining a preliminary idea from the heads' statements about the significance of various areas in the school running for the school culture and its development - that is to identify the areas preferred by the heads and to understand the whole scale of reasons which lead to such preferences.

Sample, methods

The respondents were the heads of fifteen basic schools in the Brno region. The criteria for their choice were the characteristics of their schools and of the place where their school was situated. We took into consideration the community's population, the number of pupils in the

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[1] In the Czech Republic basic school takes nine years (ISCED 1 + 2) and pupils enter the school at the age of six.

school and "organizational" criteria (we left out schools founded less than five years ago, schools after any fundamental reorganization and schools occupying more than one building). According to the number of the community's inhabitants and number of school's pupils there were chosen three groups of schools in the Brno region. Each group includes five schools:

1. regional town (Brno) – school with 500-1.000 pupils,

2. district town (20.000-70.000 inhabitants) – school with 300-700 pupils,

3. small community (max. 3.000 inhabitants) – school with 250-500 pupils.

In the individual groups we carried out a random choice of schools and contacted their heads. After an agreement with the heads we provided them with a questionnaire which offered a list of ten points (see table No. 1 with some of the results stated) covering the fundamental areas of school running which were usually connected with the concept of the school culture both in foreign and Czech sources[2]. We asked the heads to order these ten areas according to how significant the potential they felt in them was for the development of their school. There was also the opportunity for the heads to fill in other areas and incorporate them in their order.

We ended up the questionnaire part of the pre-research with twelve questionnaires returned. Only in Brno we got all the questionnaires back, in district towns we got three out of five and in small community four out of five questionnaires.

In each category we contacted one of the heads, chosen at random, and asked them (successfully) for an interview. Each of the three interviews was held only once and recorded - the data processing was based on the exact transcription of the recorded interviews. The frame of the interview was given by the following structure of the leading topics which the heads had been gradually asked:

1. Explain the decision-making process when filling in the questionnaire (the key information is to what extend it is possible to separate individual areas from the complex of school running).

2. Explain the order of school running areas in the questionnaire.

3. Explain the significance of the various areas of school running for the development of school and its culture.

4. Find and order significant events in the school life (both in the past and in the present) which are related to the school development.

5. Explain the philosophy of the further school development.

Findings

The questionnaire part of the pre-research has brought information which is summarized in the following table (except open-ended question where the heads filled in other areas).

Table No. 1. The questionnaire key part: areas of the school running ordered according to their significance (the heads' view)

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[2] Analysis of Czech and foreign sources linked with the topic of school culture and particularly with the relationship between the school culture and school development was carried out before the questionnaire procedure. Because of the lack of space in this contribution we will not pay attention to it. The analysis of the sources will be a part of a study which is soon to be offered to the Czech educational quarterly journal Pedagogika.

Order of signify-cance	Area	Order given - median	Order given - modus
1	**Agreement on Principles** The ability and goodwill of all groups of people at school (management, groups of teachers and other employees, pupils) to agree on their own school running rules.	2	1
2	**Vision Creation and Process of Aiming at it** All people at school (management, teachers, pupils, other employees) work on the creation and fulfilling of their shared idea about the future image of the school.	3	2
3	**School Openness** Cooperation and communication of the school with parents, municipal authorities and ministry of education. School's presentation in public.	3,5	2
4	**Management and Administration Styles** Management by orders or by information. Management based on extrinsic motivation (rewards, formal rules) or intrinsic motivation.	4	4
5	**School Development and Change** Gradual and systematic changes in the organization of the school work. Freedom to experiment with new approaches.	5,5	5
6	**Support from Colleagues** Experience exchanges, professional dialogue and cooperation with colleague-teachers. Using the feedback from colleagues.	6	3
7	**School Physical Environment** School's location, various buildings, all the equipment and its optimal use.	6,5	6
8	**Professional Growth** Support for the school employees' personal and professional growth, creation of conditions for employees' further education, training and development.	7	7
9	**Informal School Life** People identify themselves with the school's symbols, they are proud of their school. Customs and traditions are carried over at communal meetings.	8	8
10	**Working with Conflicts** Ways of solving conflicts, working with "problem" people. Managing discipline of both employees and students.	9	9
	Other Areas		

We expected that it would not be easy for the heads to make the order of significance in a relatively entire file of school running areas as they were offered. In spite of all that, we assumed that the chosen order would reflect the heads' awareness of the primary task which was demanded of them: offering the people both inside and outside the school a vision of the school development, enabling the participation on the school cultivation, creating conditions for the development of the processes of cooperation among the people inside and outside the school - taking all important school running areas into consideration.

The first presupposition, which comes out of these expectations, is that the heads are clear about the priorities and are able to argue for them. The statements of all three heads in the interviews may give an impression that their decision-making is very much at random or influenced by particular situations. This is confirmed by this statement: *"If I did the ordering again today, I think it wouldn't be the same. I need to admit that I am influenced by my mood*

at a particular time" [3] (1). But at the moment when the heads start talking about their school and its concrete conditions, their statements are obviously well thought out, clear and stable. This opinion stability, supported by the agreement among all the questioned heads, is particularly obvious with those items placed at the top ranks in the chart of priorities.

The top ranking areas are "Agreement on Principles" and "Vision Creation and Process of Aiming at it". The heads consider these areas important regarding the need of the school to make both an outside and inside impression of unity.

Just as we expected, the formulation of a problem stemming from the theory is not always compatible with the practical reality of the problem. The example is the item "School Openness" which refers to the cooperation with people and institutions outside the school. Although the item is relatively top ranking in the evaluation of its significance for the school development, it does not cover the large range of the problem as far as the relationship of the school to its environment is concerned. In the interviews a sudden emphasis is put on the need to satisfy the demands and expectations of the school's environment (municipal authorities etc.). Generally, all the heads (1), (2) and (3) apprehend this problem very similarly though its concrete solution is different with each of them. In one case it is the foundation of classes for dyslectic children which guarantee the school its position in the Brno school market. In another case the school feels that its basic task lies in satisfying the demands of secondary schools. The last case concerns a school situated in a place with a lack of free-time activities, thus the school feels the duty to concentrate on such supply. None of these possible solutions may be solely covered by the item of "School Openness". It is a much larger problem which may be considered, for instance, in the context of a school as an institution reacting to demands from outside.

The tricky features of the questionnaire method dealing with the problem of school running are also highlighted in the area called "Professional Growth". This item, rather surprisingly for us, appeared at the 8th rank out of ten - a relatively low position in a chart of the heads' priorities as far as the school development is concerned. Does it mean that the professional growth is perceived as the teachers' personal interest? Unfortunately, the questionnaire part of the pre-research does not provide us with enough information to answer this question. But if we complete the questionnaire findings with the interview information, we find out that the stated supporting arguments for such ranking are very different in their character. First, it is the fact (linked to the school's orientation on dyslectic children) that the long serving teachers have to extend their education when carrying out school's new conception whereas the new teachers are employed with such education that is compatible with school's orientation (1). Second, what matters is the school running aspects and different interests in the various age categories of teachers (2). In the third interview we again find a different kind of argumentation - if the school is clear about its direction, teachers' interest in education comes naturally (3). Thus here we have three different categories of arguments explaining the low ranking of one of the items.

Partial conclusions

The pre-research findings show that our starting ideas about the heads' views of various areas of the school culture and their relationship to the school development were different from those of the heads (expressed by ordering the significance of partial school running areas). But generally, there were only minor differences (an exception was the explicitly defined

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[3] Cited from interviews with the heads. The heads are given numbers : (1) a head of a Brno school, (2) a head of a district town school, (3) a head of a small community school.

teacher cooperation though it was implicitly expressed in the core of the areas presented among the priorities).

The pre-research does not falsify the logic of our original reasoning. As far as the language of the problem description is concerned, there were a few unclear concepts, e.g. the different understanding of "school openness". The interviews also show that the heads understand the concept of "school development" in various ways - thus next time it will be necessary to explain very carefully.

Next, the pre-research shows that it is possible to find basic, organizing components of the school running which are the starting points for the school culture and its development. It is those components which are the top ranking ones in the heads' charts of priorities. Among them there is, for instance, an area that was named "Agreement on Principles" whose main point is the respect for and loyalty to the fundamental school conception and its key decisions. But there are also items that the heads put (to our surprise) relatively low in the chart, e.g. "Support from Colleagues" and "Professional Growth". Reasons for their low ranks are various.

It seems that the school heads as people directly responsible for the processes at school are clearly aware of the significance of people's agreement on school work principles and the significance of a vision creation and the process of aiming at it. Similarly, they regard the external school relationships as the key ones. At the same time the heads put emphasis on their own managing role. Precisely these areas could be regarded as fundamental in the considerations about the strategies of school culture development.

Conversely, what is neglected is the systematic work with personal and professional relationships inside the school, explicit support for work. It seems to be necessary to draw attention to the potential hidden in these areas and to find possibilities of its use.

Implications for further action

The pre-research seems to confirm the correct choice of areas which are typically connected with the school culture and its development. The pre-research has also enriched our knowledge of the features observed, with the "inner" view in particular. Such knowledge will have to be taken into consideration next time. We think that we may carry on with the research in its original direction.

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